

Obituaries

Gajendra Sinh

(18 August 1921–2013)



Dr Gajendra Sinh was born on 18 August 1921 to the Thakur of Kathiwara amidst the beautiful environs of the north-western Vindhya, 32 km from Alirajpur. His schooling was at Charterhouse in England. This eminent institution was founded in 1611 by Thomas Sutton in London and was relocated in 1872 to Godalming in Surrey, UK. It had, among its earlier students, John Wesley (founder

of Methodism), Robert Baden-Powell (founder of the Boy Scouts), Gregory Bateson (anthropologist), Max Beerbohm (satirist), Robert Graves (poet) and Ralph Vaughan-Williams (composer). The school had its goals clearly laid out: 'Our priorities at Charterhouse are primarily academic, but that does not mean only achieving qualifications by passing examinations. We aim to stimulate independent enquiry and intellectual curiosity, to enrich spiritual awareness, to match physical fitness with love of the arts, and to promote individuality together with a sense of duty to friends and society.' Certainly, Charterhouse succeeded very well with this young student from Kathiwara.

The outbreak of the Second World War made his return to India imperative. His years at St Xavier's College, Mumbai (1940–42) must have enriched his understanding of science but were remembered more fondly by him for the opportunity to get to know the national table tennis champion, Meera Kudav, who ultimately agreed to be his wife.

He graduated in medicine from the Grant Medical College in 1947, having captained the college team in cricket, hockey, football and athletics.

Dr Gajendra Sinh obtained the Fellowship of the Royal Colleges of Surgeons in Edinburgh and England and trained to be a thoracic surgeon. On his return to India in 1955, his mentor and then Dean of the Grant Medical College, Dr Shantilal J. Mehta, requested him to set up a department of neurosurgery. Dr Mehta arranged for Dr Gajendra Sinh to go to Christian Medical College and Hospital, Vellore and work with Dr Jacob Chandy from 1955 to 1957. This started a deep friendship with Dr Chandy that ended only with Dr Chandy's death in 2007.

Department of Neurosurgery, Sir J.J. Hospital

On his return from Vellore in 1958, Dr Gajendra Sinh started the department of neurosurgery in the Yellappa Balaram Pavilion in the Sir David Sassoon building. He was allotted just four beds in Dr Shantilal Mehta's general surgical ward and was asked to operate in a general surgery theatre after the general surgeon had completed his list for the day. The radiology department was in the adjacent outpatients building and taking patients to and fro for ventriculography and angiography was time-consuming and nerve-racking.

Among his early registrars were Dr Gongal (from Nepal) and

the late Dr V.I. Buch (subsequently a consultant plastic surgeon). Dr Vijay Dave joined Dr Gajendra Sinh as Assistant Professor and they complemented one another. Hailing from a princely family, Dr Gajendra Sinh had royal tastes, a need for perfection and impatience with bureaucracy and officialdom. Dr Dave was down-to-earth, patient, gentle and modest. He admired and respected Dr Gajendra Sinh. Learning neurosurgery from them was a treat. Dr Gajendra Sinh brought to us his British training in thoracic surgery and his training in neurosurgery under Dr Jacob Chandy. Dr Dave imparted to us all that he had learnt under Drs Wilder Penfield, William Cone, Theodore Rasmussen, Arthur Elvidge, Herbert Jasper and others at the Montreal Neurological Institute.

Dr Gajendra Sinh created a library in the department office in Ward 25 where he placed all his books on neurosurgery, issues of the *Journal of Neurosurgery* and other relevant publications for his residents to use.

Since the hospital did not have instruments needed for neurosurgery, Dr Gajendra Sinh had purchased, from personal funds, sets needed for such procedures as drilling burr holes, performing laminectomy and performing craniotomy. These sets were deposited in the operation theatres for use by any member of his staff. He also purchased and kept his Asahi Pentax Spotmatic camera in the department so that we could use it for photographing patients, specimens and make slides for teaching. He gave us his Olivetti portable typewriter to prepare summaries on each patient for our department records.

He was strict on a number of matters: the care of patients, maintenance of records, discipline, courtesy to everyone in the department and respect towards our nurses. Sister Biwalkar, in charge of Ward 25, and Sister Gaikwad, in charge of the operation theatre, were always listened to gravely and their suggestions for the improvement of the department implemented as soon as possible. He kept in touch with Sister Biwalkar after she retired and soon got her into Jaslok Hospital as the Matron. He was later to help both these admirable nurses right up to their deaths.

He replaced the lumpy cotton mattresses on all our beds in Wards 24 and 25 by foam rubber mattresses, using his own funds and those donated by well-wishers. This reduced the incidence of pressure ulcers in bed-ridden patients.

He set up a three-bed neurosurgery intensive care room near the entrance to Ward 25. He published few papers but these continue to be read and quoted. In particular I refer to his work on tuberculosis of the central nervous system and craniovertebral anomalies.

If he had faults, he hid them successfully. He imparted to us his perennial philosophy. 'Don't take yourself too seriously.' This ensured that we were never afflicted by pomposity and arrogance. 'Fight for what is right' and 'Never give in to the bureaucrats' taught us to persevere in order to improve conditions for our patients and further develop the department.

It was a matter of satisfaction to him that whenever Dr Noshir Antia, Professor of Plastic Surgery, went on leave, he left Dr Gajendra Sinh as his *locum tenens*. 'Noshir realizes that our surgery is as delicate as the operations he himself performs on nerves, faces and hands.'

Being a resident in his department meant constant exposure to

humour. Dr Noshir Wadia was often teased for taking his responsibilities too seriously. (Dr Wadia's leg was also pulled for the little 'beetle' [Fiat] he used for a car while Dr Gajendra Sinh gloried in his huge British Aston-Martin limousine.) And when Dr Gajendra Sinh was in the company of Dr Jimmy Sidhva, our consultant neuroradiologist, guffaws were the rule, each inspiring the other to greater humour.

Dr Gajendra Sinh retired from his *alma mater* in 1977. At Dr Shantilal Mehta's request, he had started another department of neurosurgery at the new Jaslok Hospital in 1972. He served this hospital to the end. As a final act of service to his teacher, he served as the chief trustee of the research fund set up by Dr Mehta till it was wound up.

Among the honours received by Dr Gajendra Sinh is that of being the President of the Neurological Society of India in 1975. (He had served it well in the capacity of Secretary [1965–75] and

had organized the 3rd Asian and Oceanian Congress of Neurology in Bombay.)

Pneumonia, 'the old man's friend', helped him lapse into a state of reduced consciousness and slip peacefully away in his sleep.

Mr Vijay Merchant, the great cricketer, was Dr Gajendra Sinh's neighbour. Mr Merchant cherished the motto 'Play the game'. Dr Gajendra Sinh played an outstanding innings and did so with a straight bat. His final retirement to the pavilion on high was in the fullness of time and deserves applause.

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S.S. Agarwal

(5 July 1941–2 December 2013)



A VISIONARY CLINICIAN AND A SCIENTIST PAR EXCELLENCE

Dr S.S. Agarwal, fondly known as 'SS' to many, left for his heavenly abode on 2 December 2013 after a massive heart attack. His sad and sudden demise has left a big void in the field of research in medicine and biological sciences in India. Dr Agarwal was a Georgian and completed his medical education

from King George's Medical College, Lucknow with a record-breaking number of awards and gold medals. He went to the USA and worked in research laboratories, which influenced his career and perhaps the future of medical genetics in India. His intelligent and visionary mind could foresee the coming era of molecular medicine. After coming back to India, Dr Agarwal was instrumental in the planning and execution of many Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR)-sponsored research projects in Genetics, including the study of periconceptional folic acid therapy in the prevention of neural tube defects. This was the beginning of medical genetics in India. His research work was duly recognized and he was conferred with many prestigious awards including the Shanti Swaroop Bhatnagar award and the Vigyan Ratna award.

He played a key role in the inception of Sanjay Gandhi Postgraduate Institute of Medical Sciences (SGPGIMS) at Lucknow where in 1990 he started a formal 3-year DM programme in medical genetics for medical postgraduates. This course led to the establishment of the discipline of medical genetics in India. The course, the only one of its kind at present in India, turns out trained medical experts in clinical as well as laboratory genetics. He started with the 'A' of the 'A T G C' of genetics and

established up-to-date medical genetics facilities in patient care and research. He was happy to see many SGPGIMS-trained medical geneticists heading different medical genetics centres in India. As his first DM (Medical Genetics) student, I had the opportunity to work closely with him for almost 25 years.

He was an astute clinician and a knowledge bank. His algorithmic approach in clinical settings, voracious appetite for recent knowledge and stress on medical research influenced and astonished everyone around him. He emphasized the need for laboratory work and involvement in basic research for clinicians. This turned out to be the strength of students and faculty members of SGPGIMS. What is said about medical genetics is also true for clinical immunology. The Department of Clinical Immunology with its DM programme established by Dr Agarwal has been a trendsetter in India. He not only contributed to education in medical genetics and clinical immunology, but also planned and organized academic activities and research ethos at SGPGIMS. Dr Agarwal guided the growth of SGPGIMS in the capacity of Dean and Director of the Institute. His methodical approach, and knowledge of technology and equipment helped the Institute immensely. After his superannuation from SGPGIMS, Dr Agarwal joined as Director of the prestigious Advanced Centre for Treatment, Research and Education in Cancer (ACTREC) at Mumbai. Under his leadership, ACTREC has developed into a state-of-art cancer treatment and research facility which now does excellent work in cancer genetics and genetic counselling for familial cancers.

Dr Agarwal not only worked for SGPGIMS, but also guided research in medicine and biological sciences in India by heading many committees of the ICMR, Department of Biotechnology, Department of Science and Technology, etc. His ability to read thoroughly, analyse and discuss coherently the projects under consideration helped many young researchers in India. Age was never a deterrent for him. Even until a few days before his death, he was enthusiastically participating in conferences and other academic deliberations, encouraging and inspiring younger generations of doctors to broaden their clinical perspective and